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ABSTRACT

The effects of 80 second- through fifth-grade boys and girls of three types of adult commentary (anti-aggressive, nonaggressive, neutral), presented during a violent TV show, were examined and compared to a nonviolent control film group. Subjects' latency in seeking responsible adult assistance when witnessing "real" aggression among other children was measured. In addition, a paper and pencil response hierarchy measure was employed to assess subjects' solutions to hypothetical conflict situations. Results indicated that antiaggressive and nonaggressive commentary subjects were faster in the summoning of help than were neutral commentary subjects. Neutral commentary children were significantly slower than control film subjects in summoning the experimenter. For the response hierarchy measure, the experimental groups did not differ significantly. (Author)

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MITIGATING THE IMPACT OF TELEVISED VIOLENCE THROUGH CONCURRENT ADULT COMMENTARY

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Television has been the subject of extensive research over the last 25 years (see Bandura, 1973; Liebert & Schwartzberg, 1977). Much of this research has focused on the types of messages transmitted by television and the possible effects these messages may have on viewers--particularly young viewers. In the special case of televised violence, these messages may have socially significant implications. For example, young children may repeat what is seen on a particular program (imitation effect, e.g., Daven, O'Connor, & Briggs, 1976) or they may engage in general forms of aggression as a result of viewing such violence (disinhibitory effect, e.g., Liebert & Baron, 1972). Children exposed to media violence also may become more tolerant of aggression in real-life settings (Drabman & Thomas, 1975, 1976). That is, they may perceive it as commonplace and unworthy of any special attention (toleration effect).

Evidence also indicates that young children often cannot distinguish between reality and fantasy violence (Leifer & Roberts, 1972), frequently cannot connect the consequences of a given aggressive act with the act itself when there is a delay in presenting the consequences (Collins, 1973), and are even less able to understand the often complex motives for aggression (Collins, Berndt, & Hess, 1974). Thus, widely touted remedies for media violence such as punishing the aggressor, etc. may not, as they are presented on television, really be remedies at all. This problem is compounded by the fact that children spend the majority of their viewing time watching programs produced for adult consumption and,

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consequently, adult comprehension.

In view of this evidence, numerous individuals and groups (e.g., the PTA) have suggested that parents watch TV with their children in order to clarify, interpret, and evaluate what is shown--in other words, to mediate the medium's messages. In this way, parents may use TV as a tool in helping their children understand the complex world around them. Evidence in support of mediation has come from laboratory studies (Grusec, 1973; Hicks, 1968) and from research using nonbehavioral measures (Corder-Bolz & O'Bryant, 1978; Walling, 1976). Unfortunately, the methodologies of even these few studies severely limit the conclusions that can be drawn.

One of the few experiments to assess the effect of adult mediation (commentary) on the impact of televised violence using a nonlaboratory setting and a behavioral measure recently was carried out by the present authors (Horton & Santogrossi, 1978). In this experiment, individual elementary school boys sat with an adult and viewed an excerpt from a popular police drama which contained several scenes of violence. Boys in the antiaggressive commentary group heard the adult make concurrent scripted comments censuring the violent acts. Subjects in the nonaggressive commentary group heard statements from the adult which, instead of disapproving the aggression, provided nonviolent alternatives to it. Boys in the neutral commentary group heard nonevaluative comments containing none of these elements; rather these statements merely described the action taking place. Boys in a nonviolent control film group watched a videotaped volleyball game but were provided no accompanying commentary.

A latency measure, which is thought to assess tolerance of aggression, was utilized to determine the effect of such commentary and was highly similar to the "tolerance measure" employed in the Drabman and Thomas experiments.

Briefly, children in their studies were led to believe they were watching other children engaging in a playroom fight which gradually increased in intensity. They were told to seek the assistance of the experimenter if the playroom children misbehaved. Subjects waited considerably longer before summoning adult intervention if they previously had viewed a violent program than if they had not. The longer latencies exhibited by the experimental group has been attributed to the development by these children of greater "tolerance" or "indifference" toward aggression produced by viewing violent programs. In our study, where the latency measure was employed to determine if adult commentary could couteract or modify the toleration effect produced by exposure to TV violence, the results revealed that boys in the neutral commentary group delayed longer and viewed more intense levels of aggression between the confederate preschoolers before summoning help than did children in either the antiaggressive or nonaggressive commentary conditions. Thus, an effect of adult commentary was established, at least for boys, in this setting.

The present study was proposed to replicate this previous investigation, and to examine the effects of adult commentary on elementary school-age girls as well. We predicted that boys and girls exposed to either antiaggressive or nonaggressive commentary would significantly reduce their latency in summoning adult help (tolerance for aggression) over neutral commentary children. There were no predictions regarding differences in responsivity between boys and girls.

A paper-and-pencil measure (response hierarchy) was added to assess the effects of adult commentary on subjects' responses to hypothetical conflict situations. Specifically, recent research by Thomas & Drabman (1978) indicates that exposure to televised displays of violence can significantly increase children's expectations of aggressive behavior by other individuals. The

purpose of the response hierarchy booklet, then, was to assess the effect adult commentary might have in modifying these expectations. Predictions were similar to the latency measure in that children exposed to either anti-aggressive or nonaggressive commentary would have lower expectations of others' aggression than would neutral commentary children. Neutral commentary subjects were predicted to have greater expectations of others' aggression than would children exposed to a nonviolent control film.

METHOD

Subjects, Design, and Experimenters

Forty boys and 40 girls participated in the present experiment. Children were selected from second through fifth grade classes at a local public school. Written permission was obtained from both subjects and parents prior to participation. Subjects' ages ranged from 7 years, 7 months to 13 years, 7 months (Grand Mean = 9 years, 7 months; boys: $\overline{X}$ = 9 years, 7 months; girls: $\overline{X}$ = 9 years, 9 months). A two-way analysis of variance performed on the age data revealed no significant age differences between sexes, no significant age differences between experimental groups, and no interaction (all $ps > .50$).

A two (male, female) by four (antiaggressive commentary, nonaggressive commentary, neutral commentary, control) factorial design was employed for subject distribution among the experimental conditions.

Five undergraduate students (two males, three females) served as experimenters. All experimenters were trained, prior to the study, to make standard scripted comments to the children about selected violent acts in the TV drama. A sixth experimenter was employed solely to administer the response hierarchy booklet.

Equipment and films

All films were videotaped and presented on a black and white television monitor. Subjects in antiaggressive, nonaggressive, and neutral commentary conditions watched a 12 minute excerpt from a popular police drama. Although edited, the film retained the original storyline. Children in the nonviolent control film group watched a 12 minute excerpt from a recently televised volleyball game. The real-life aggression film (Thomas, Horton, Lippincott, & Drabman, 1977) used for the latency measure was approximately 7 1/2 minutes long. It portrayed two preschoolers (confederates) who engaged in a series of

escalating aggressive actions which ended in physical aggression and property damage.

Children were escorted, individually, to the experimental area by an experimenter of the same sex. Once in the experimental room, the experimenter turned on the TV monitor and covertly activated the hidden videotape player. Subjects then watched one of the two TV programs. Children who watched the violent police drama were exposed to one of three forms of experimenter commentary. These scripted statements were made concurrent with specific violent scenes in the program. In the neutral commentary condition, the experimenter merely described the violent action on the screen to the child without evaluating it (e.g., "That policeman has a big rifle....That man has a small gun"). Children in the antiaggressive commentary group heard the experimenter criticize these same scenes with such statements as, "Shooting at that policeman is disgusting.... What he did was terribly wrong").

For children in the nonaggressive commentary condition, the experimenter provided positive (nonviolent) alternatives to the aggressive displays (e.g., "There are other ways instead of shooting....Talking, or just giving himself up"). These nonaggressive statements did <u>not</u> include direct disapproval of the violence. The three commentaries were equated on word count in order to control for simple exposure effects to the experimenter's commentary. Subjects in the nonviolent control film condition watch the volleyball game without hearing experimenter comments of any kind.

After the show, the experimenter glanced at his(her) watch and explained that the school principal was going to contact him(her) very shortly regarding an important matter. The experimenter added that this caused a problem because

he(she) also had promised to watch some preschoolers for a friend at the same time. The experimenter explained to the child that the preschoolers were in a nearby playroom but could be watched on the TV monitor because a television camera which could "see and hear everything that went on" had been placed in the playroom. He(She) demonstrated the closed-circuit "system" by activating the TV monitor (which revealed a vacant playroom) and told the subject that the children would arrive shortly. He(She) then asked the child to watch the preschoolers while he(she) was in a nearby room waiting to hear from the principal. The experimenter instructed the subject to summon him(her) immediately (by knocking on the door) if the children were to "get into trouble." While in the other room, he(she) recorded the time it took before the subject knocked on the door to seek help.

To those children who summoned help, the experimenter explained that the preschoolers and the equipment were unharmed and that his(her) friend would be there very shortly to "take care of everything."

Response Hierarchy Booklet

After the latency measure, the experimenter escorted the child to another area of the school building where he(she) was introduced to a second experimenter who administered the response hierarchy. The response booklet (Leifer & Roberts, 1972) described nine situations that were likely to anger children. For each situation there were four characteristic response exemplifying physical aggression, verbal aggression, escaping the situation, and positive coping (including telling an adult). Six pairs of characteristic responses, representing all possible solutions to each situation, were presented for each situation. Each response had a cartoon frame associated with it. For example, for physical aggression, the frame depicted one cartoon character hitting another as one possible response to the situation. The following represents one of the nine situations used in the study as well as the six pairs of responses:

You're walking down the street. Someone is mad at you and come up and hits you. What would most other children do?

A. Hit them or leave them?
B. Tell a grownup or call them "stupid"?
C. Leave them or tell a grownup?
D. Leave them or call them "stupid"?
E. Hit them or call them "stupid"?
F. Tell a grownup or hit them?

Subjects were told to choose between the two responses for each of the six pairs.

Although the situations and response pairs were identical to those used by Leifer and Roberts, the manner in which they were presented was modified for the present study. In contrast to the original procedure--which required subjects to indicate their own responses to each hypothetical situation--children were instructed to indicate how they thought most other children their age would react in a similar situation (see Thomas & Drabman, 1978).

After the first administration of the booklet, the situations were immediately repeated a second time, but with different instructions. For this administration, subjects were instructed to choose the response which indicated the very best or right thing to do (see Thomas & Drabman, 1978). Thus assessments were made of children's perceptions of both normative and morally correct behaviors for the nine conflict situations.

After the response hierarchy booklet was completed, the child was thanked for his(her) participation and escorted back to the classroom. At the end of the study, children were debriefed in groups by grade.

RESULTS

In the latency situation, all subjects summoned the experimenter. For the latency measure itself, latency or tolerance was defined as the amount of time each subject viewed actual aggression between the preschoolers before summoning adult help. This score was computed by subtracting the amount of time elapsing before the first aggressive act in the playroom from each subject's total recorded time in the room. Thus, a high latency score identified subjects who viewed or "tolerated" violence for a longer period of time.

A two-way analysis of variance, with sex and experimental condition treated as factors, was performed on the latency data. The results revealed a significant main effect for conditions, F (3, 72) = 10.52, $p < .001$, but no significant sex-related differences, $F < 1$, and no interaction, $F < 1$.

A Newman-Keuls sequential range test performed on the treatment means (see Table 1) indicated, as expected, that antiaggressive and nonaggressive commentary children sought adult assistance significantly faster than did neutral commentary subjects. Moreover, neutral commentary subjects were significantly slower to intervene in the preschoolers' altercation than were nonviolent control film children. No significant differences were found between antiaggressive commentary, nonaggressive commentary, and control film subjects' latency scores.

Because developmental differences have been found in children's reactions to adult sanctions (see e.g., Grusec, 1973), a correlational analysis was performed on subjects' age and latency data. The results revealed no such developmental relationship within the age range used in this study ($r = .11$, $p > .17$).

As noted above for the response hierarchy measure, subjects could choose one of four characteristic solutions (i.e., physical aggression, verbal aggression, leaving the situation, or positive coping). The frequency with which subjects chose either a physically aggressive or verbally aggressive solution to a con-

flict situation constituted the aggression measure (Leifer & Roberts, 1972). Scores for each situation could range from a low of 1 (where the choice was between physical or verbal aggression) to a high of 5. These scores were summed across all nine conflict situations for each presentation of the booklet. The mean number of aggressive choices for normative and morally correct solutions are presented in Table 2.

A three-way analysis of variance, with sex and experimental conditions treated as independent factors and response hierarchy presentation treated as the repeated measure, were performed on the data. The results revealed that aggressive choices were significantly more frequent for normative solutions to the conflict situations than they were for morally correct solutions, F (1, 72) = 45.456, $p < .001$. In addition, there was a significant three-way interaction, F (3, 72) = 3.784, $p < .05$. There were no other significant main effects nor significant two-way interactions (all Fs < 1.3). Subsequent analyses of the response booklet data were performed for each sex and presentation of the hierarchy separately, across experimental conditions (i.e., for simple, simple main effects). The results indicated that the experimental conditions did not account for significant sources of variance in the three-way interaction.

In addition, correlational analyses were performed between subjects' ages and their aggression scores on the response hierarchy for each of the presentations. Significant correlations were found between age and frequency of aggressive choices for both normative ($r = .211$, d.f. = 78, $p < .05$) and morally correct ($r = .272$, d.f. = 78, $p < .05$) presentations of the response hierarchy booklet.

DISCUSSION

For the latency measure, the hypotheses were confirmed. Commentary of either a censorious or nonaggressive nature was effective in reducing subjects' latency in summoning responsible adult assistance when viewing "real-life" aggression. Further, neutral commentary subjects, as predicted, were significantly slower to intervene in the playroom altercation than were nonviolent control film children. The present study, in addition to replicating previous findings (Horton & Santogrossi, 1978), has extended the influence of concurrent commentary to the latency behavior of elementary school age girls as well.

In keeping with previous interpretations, adult commentary appears to modify subjects' perceptions of what constitutes "aggressive" behavior. Thus, supplemental evaluations presented by an adult during so-called "action" sequences of a violent program may counteract the impact of such fare whether the commentary is censorious or provides positive (nonviolent) alternatives to aggression without directly disapproving it.

It is not known, however, whether commentary increased subjects' responsivity by modifying their <u>own</u> definitions of aggression or whether they intervened when the playroom fight escalated to a point commensurate with what the children believed was the <u>adult's</u> definition of misbehavior. Future studies will examine these alternative explanations. In addition, studies are planned using parents as commentators with their commentary being employed over a longer period of time (e.g., days, weeks, etc.) in a home setting.

The results for hierarchy measure, though not as clear cut, were consistent with previous findings in two respects. First, presentation of the hierarchy under two different sets of preliminary instructions was effective in enabling subjects to discriminate between normative and morally correct solutions to hypothetical conflict situations (see Thomas & Drabman, 1978). Second, the present results were similar to previous findings (Leifer & Roberts, 1972;

Thomas & Drabman, 1978) in that a significant positive relationship was found between frequency of aggressive solutions and age. The fact that age and frequency of aggressive choices were only moderately related, however, makes this conclusion somewhat more tentative.

Predictions regarding the effect of concurrent commentary on children's expectations of others' aggression were not confirmed. One possible explanation for this lack of a significant treatment effect concerns the manner in which the response hierarchy was presented. Specifically, by employing a second experimenter solely to administer the response hierarchy, children were required to respond to the conflict situations in the first experimenter's absence. Thus, the effect of the experimenter's concurrent statements may be specific to situations where the commentator is physically present. Research by Hicks (1968) has shown that verbal censure of a short duration was effective in modifying the impact of a specially prepared aggressive modeling film on young children only when the same experimenter was with the child during measurement of that subject's aggressive play. The first experimenter, then, may have acted as a discriminative stimulus in that children were able to discriminate between the first experimenter, whose attitude toward aggression was very explicit, and the second experimenter, whose attitude toward aggression was not known. This explanation lends support to the alternative interpretation, noted above, which states that children responded in the latency situation in relation to what they thought was the adult's definition of aggression. Had concurrent commentary been of a longer duration (i.e., presented during an entire one-hour drama) its effects may have generalized to the response booklet situation. Further investigations are planned to examine this question.

Overall, the present results add to a growing body evidence which has demonstrated that mediation may be effective in altering the impact of television on young viewers. Specifically, concurrent commentary during TV violence can alter children's actions when they are confronted with a violent situation requiring responsible intervention (Horton & Santogrossi, 1978). Such

mediation may be employed to modify the impact of television in other ways as well. For example, concurrent commentary has effectively altered children's attitudes toward, and understanding of, truancy (Corder-Bolz & O'Bryant, 1978), learning of nondeviant social role behaviors (Walling, 1976), and consumer behavior (Prasad, Rao, & Sheikh, 1978). Moreover, this effect has been demonstrated using mediation in the form of supplementation (e.g., Walling, 1976), expansion (e.g., Corder-Bolz & O'Bryant, 1978), verbal censure (Grusec, 1973; Hicks, 1968; Horton & Santogrossi, 1978), and by presenting positive (nonviolent) alternatives to aggression (Horton & Santogrossi, 1978). It should be noted, however, that these positive findings are not unequivocal (see e.g., Prasad, Rao, & Sheikh, 1978).

In conclusion, mediation is showing increasing promise as a viable solution to problems associated with the all-too-apparent negative impact of television on children. As former FCC commisioner Nicholas Johnson has stated, "All television is educational. The question is, what is it teaching?" With respect to mediation, concerned parents now might answer with, "what we allow it to teach."

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TABLE 1

Mean Latency Scores in Seconds*

Subjects	Experimental Conditions							
	Antiaggressive		Nonaggressive		Neutral		Control	
	M	S.D.	M	S.D.	M	S.D.	M	S.D.
Boys	58.5_{a}	52.91	46.2_{a}	37.05	123.3_{b}	61.02	$76.8_{a,c}$	26.76
Girls	40.2_{a}	35.90	61.3_{a}	34.47	$118.7_{b,c}$	65.90	$75.9_{a,b}$	30.28
Combined	49.35_{a}	44.99	53.75_{a}	35.68	121.00_{b}	61.94	$76.35_{a,c}$	27.81

* Means which share a common subscript do not differ significantly ($p > .05$).

TABLE 2

Mean Frequency of
Aggressive Responses

Condition	Response Hierarchy Solutions			
	Normative		Morally Correct	
	M	S.D.	M	S.D.
Antiaggressive				
Boys	15.7	8.97	12.2	7.21
Girls	17.1	8.56	9.2	0.42
Nonaggressive				
Boys	20.7	9.72	11.7	5.03
Girls	15.3	9.67	12.5	4.01
Neutral				
Boys	19.0	8.06	15.1	6.32
Girls	23.5	10.96	12.7	4.92
Control				
Boys	22.4	13.96	10.2	1.62
Girls	16.0	8.64	12.1	6.15

Note: Aggression scores could range from 9 to 45.